U.S. COAST GUARD
MARINE SAFETY OFFICE PORTLAND, MAINE

SAFETY ALERT

Capsize/Sudden Sinking Advisory

Within the first three weeks of 1999 ten commercial fishermen were killed or remain missing following the capsize or sudden sinking of three large fishing vessels in the southern New England and New York/New Jersey areas. While the investigations into the causes of each of these accidents remain in progress, a pattern of critical details is emerging from initial review of these accidents.

All of these accidents involved sudden loss of the vessels. Two of the vessels were able to only broadcast very brief mayday calls. Two of the vessels were lost with all hands, on one of the vessels involved the crew was able to hastily abandon the vessel.

All of the sinkings involved failure of critical lifesaving equipment. While possibly related to the speed of the sinking, each vessel's EPIRB failed to transmit (or deploy).

All of these accidents involved vessels in the surf clam fishery. Initial reports suggest that conditions within the surf clam fishery are good, which suggests that the vessels involved may have been heavily laden. Heavily laden vessels have significantly lesser ability to survive flooding incidents than those with a lesser load.

Stability ocnditions on these vessels may have been a factor in their sudden loss. Fishermen in Maine have experienced a rash of stability related sinkings, the most recent being the December 2, 1997 capsize of a scallop dragger near Winter Harbor. While at least 10 Maine fishing vessels have been lost to stability related incidents in recent years, no loss of life has been recorded. Heavily laden vessels, towing of gear from points high above deck, handling of heavy fishing gear, and unsecured loads of deck were the primary factors in these accidents.

Flooding in lazarette compartments is a well documented accident sequence leading to loss of fishing vessels. Flooding through rudder post packing glands, hull damage from forces involved in handling fishing gear (otter door impact, wear on net ramps, etc.), and degradation of water tight hatches on deck (resulting in down flooding) are the most common sources of lazarette compartment flooding.

The Portland based AARON & MELISSA, December, 1993. While this vessel was lost, the survival of the crew is directly attributable to the intergrity of internal water tight bulkheads, a functioning high water alarm system, functioning long range communications equipment, and flawless use of survival equipment by the vessel's crew.

Prevention Information

Inspect rudder post and stern tube fittings frequently, especially while underway.

Inspect hull for wear and damage, especially where the forces of fishing gear can cause damage.

Review stability instructions and procedures for the vessel. If none exist or if they are outdated, update them immediately.

Inspect integrity of all weather deck hatches, especially lazarette hatches.

Test high water alarm circuits before every trip.

Make sure safety gear is operational and that crew is familiar with use and emergency instructions.

For further information on this Safety Alert contact:

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